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ABSTRACT

A folktale may be defined as a tale of the people, a short, fast-moving oral or written adventure story perhaps of a comic or romantic nature. It is a traditional story of a particular group of people and follows a basic design. Since it is told by many storytellers, it has differing versions or variations. Because it has been handed down through the ages, its origin often is lost. Folktales include epics, ballads, legends, folksongs, fairy tales, myths, and fables. They are often formulaic, for example, "Henny Penny" or "The Sky is Falling In"; the chain tale, based on numbers, objects, or events; the dialogue pattern; and the accumulative stories as in "The House That Jack Built." Folk themes may be universal in nature. Many countries have stories following similar themes: foolish people who do foolish things; virtues such as humility, kindness, honesty, and hard work; and the power of love and kindness. Perhaps the most universal of fairy tales is Cinderella, with some 1,000 versions extant. Often the variation for a country reveals the character and values of the people. To make use of the wide variety of literature offered in fairy tales, teachers can use the public library system and their local school or county film catalogues to explore the diverse material available. Activities for students can include making advertising posters for particular tales, making mobiles, writing book reviews, and writing alternative endings to tales. (CRH)

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THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE FOLKTALE

WITH EXAMPLES FROM DAYS OF OLD

Folktales or stories told for and by the people are as old as mankind. In early societies the oral storyteller often was a very important and respected person. Such is the role of the storyteller in Japan. With his little cart and large placards of colored pictures depicting the stories he tells, he is a quaint remnant of old Japan. As he walks around the neighborhood, he rings his bell to inform the children that he has stories to tell. As he begins the story of Momotaro you will hear beautiful language:

"If you'll believe me there was a time when the fairies were none so shy as they are now. That was the time when beasts talked to men, when there were spells and enchantments and magic every day, when there were great stores of hidden treasure to be dug up, and adventures for the asking...."[1]

In Africa, the storyteller is still an important member of society. He wears a broad brimmed hat from which dangle carved wooden figures depicting characters of stories in his repertoire. His listeners point to the figure that represents the story they want to hear and he obligingly weaves a fascinating tale of adventure or suspense.

Down through the ages, folktales have been one means of transmitting culture, values, mores and ways of managing many of the daily chores of living. As modernization permeates the lives of more and more of the earth's people, there is concern that many of the folktales of primitive societies will be lost. If this happens much of the knowledge of early culture also will be lost. For example, today in America some children come to school with little or no knowledge of familiar folktales that their grandparents took for granted. Perhaps through folktales, more than with other literature, children learn about behaviors among people, such as justice, decency, courage, goodness and the importance of the good triumphing over the evil. Folktales provide enjoyment, depict ethical values and mores of societies, and contribute to academic learning and aesthetic growth.

A folktale may be defined as a tale of the folk, a short, fast-moving oral or written adventure story perhaps of comic or romantic nature. It is a traditional story of a particular group of people and follows a basic design. Since it is told by many storytellers, it has differing versions or variations. Because it has been handed down through the ages, its origin often is lost.

Folktales include epics, ballads, legends, folk songs, fairy tales, myths and fables. They may follow a pattern or formula. For example, there are the endless stories such as "Henny Penny" or the "Sky Is Falling In"; the chain

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1 Japanese Fairy Tales. Lafcadio Hearn. New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 1953.

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tale based on numbers, objects or events; the dialogue pattern as in "Fortunately, Unfortunately" and the accumulative stories as in "The Old Woman and Her Pig" or "The House That Jack Built." The number three is an important characteristic of folktales, i.e., the "Three Little Pigs," "The Three Bears," etc. Often there are repetitious chants or responses. Characters are either all good or all bad, poor or rich, beautiful or ugly. There are no gray areas in folktales!

Frequently time passes very quickly--a hundred years is accounted for in a sentence or two and, of course, everyone always lives happily ever after! Usually only a few sentences are given to the introduction, the setting and the conclusion, while the bulk of the story is concerned with the development of the incident that constitutes the main topic. Stories begin simply--"Once upon a time...," "Long, long ago...," "Once there lived...," etc. As mentioned, the heart of the story is the important aspect! Suspense plays an important part in the telling of the tale and in holding the attention of the listeners!

The theme of the folktale may be universal in nature. Many countries have stories following similar themes: foolish people who do foolish things; virtues such as humility, kindness, honesty, hard work; the power of love and kindness; concern for others; and in some instances horror and cruelty--often balanced with rewards for the good and kind. The good and humble are rewarded, the proud and foolish punished, and magical forces aid, protect or overthrow the wicked and egotistical. One anthology lists five types of folktales: reversal of fortune, the super hero, the fool, animal stories, enchantment or transformation, magical objects and the explanatory story. Others mention the problems of the youngest child, the wicked stepmother, the husband doing "women's work," three tasks to be fulfilled to receive a reward or riddles to solve. Some deal with the "little people" such as elves, dwarfs and fairies. Many concern a spell cast on main characters and somehow broken by the hero, or someone is released from an animal character because of a spell that is broken. This then turns him back into a person. For purposes of this paper, two themes will be developed: enchantment or transformation and magic objects.

Once it was rumored that there would be a great ball. There was much excitement throughout the kingdom. Everyone was talking about it! The mother and her daughters were talking about what to wear to such a grand affair. Suddenly a timid voice questioned, "Could I go with you?"

"Go with us? You must be out of your mind! What would you wear? You'd disgrace us!"

And Cinderella was left sobbing in the cinders of the fireplace. Suddenly there was a flash and her fairy godmother appeared..."

This is probably one of the most familiar and favorite versions of Cinderella. It is told by the famous French compiler of folktales, Perrault.

Cinderella is perhaps the most universal of all fairy tales. There exist nearly 1,000 versions all told. They are to be found in countries all over the world. The settings and details vary depending upon the geography, culture, customs, religion and beliefs of the people. Often the particular

variation for a country reveals the character and values of the people. For example, the German peoples greatly value work. Their Cinderella must stay home and shell the peas. The task at hand must go on! She would not be able to leave her work.

The Zuni Indian version has its setting near Salt Lake City. That Cinderella is a ragged, dirty, lonely little girl who must care for the turkeys. One day, feeling particularly sad, she begins to cry. The turkeys gather around her and comfort her. Soon their love and concern have transformed her into a beautiful maiden. In her new role she goes to the happy festival and dances with all the Indian braves. She has such a good time she forgets the turkeys until, suddenly remembering them at sundown, she rushes back to find they have flown away. Poor Cinderella is left in the dust clad again in her dirty rags.

In the Vietnamese version there are only two sisters. Tam is the favored one while Cam must mind the water buffalo. How she becomes the bride of the prince unfolds a familiar tale. Several differences are to be noted, brought about by the country's location, the climate, social values and customs of the people.

But in Norway there is a Cinder Lad named Askelad or Ash Lad. Cinderella has become a male! There are many tales of the good and brave deeds he does, especially how he fights and overcomes the trolls--likely symbols, no doubt, of the Norwegian hostile forces of nature. The story focuses on how Askelad outwits his mean, lazy brothers, wins the favor of the king and becomes a prince.[2]

A discussion of these various versions provides a golden opportunity to use map skills, compare life of "olden" times with that of the present, contrast the superstitions and explanations for nature found in the many folktales with the explanations of nature that modern science affords us, and provides us with rich art, drama and writing experiences. Although folktales are not as useful in math as in other content areas, a sprinkling of math terms is to be found. A term such as many leagues beneath the sea is only one example. Scarcely any part of the curriculum escapes some sort of reference in the folktale.

A brief sampling of tales of enchantment will demonstrate the universality of this folktale motif. One kind of enchantment is that of tales dealing with tiny people, including the Japanese story of "Little One Inch" who originated from bamboo; became the son of a childless, poor, old man and woman; fought ogres; saved princesses; and at last won normal size for himself. Hans Christian Andersen's "Thumbelina" is a similar tale of a tiny girl. She was born of a flower because a woman wished so earnestly for a child. Following the familiar theme of overcoming many difficulties, she at last married a handsome man just her size. In the United States we have our own version in the "Knee High Man." Again he was one who wished for normal size. How he resolved his problem may be found in the tale.

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2 Folklore and Folktales Around the World. Ruth Kearney Carlsen, Editor. Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1971.

Ireland abounds with tales of tiny people--leprechauns, fairies, elves, goblins, to mention only a few. "Kate Mary Ellen" is the story of an adventure Kate had when asked to deliver shamrocks for the fairies. Scotland, not to be outdone, has a story about a "Woman Who Flummoxed the Fairies," a fast moving account of how a housewife managed to win her freedom when kidnapped by the fairy king.

Marvelous accomplishments through enchantments are found in Arabia's "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp." Aladdin has only to summon the genie to have his every wish granted. For example, Aladdin said to the genie, "Build me a palace of the finest marble, set with jasper, agate and other precious stones. In the middle you can build me a large hall with a dome, its four walls of massy gold and silver, each side having six windows...set with diamonds and rubies."[3] Details of this marvelous magical creature and his master fill a whole book.

"Beauty and the Beast" and "Sleeping Beauty" deal with enchanted French folktale happenings. Brazil's story of "The Three Oranges" is very similar as is the Scandinavian version from East of the Sun and West of the Moon. The Swiss tale is of "Seven Ravens." All have a hero who must overcome almost impossible obstacles to set the person free from the evil spell. How this is accomplished is the fairy tale.

Metamorphosis was a common theme during the Middle Ages. Many Indian tales of North and South America, for example, involve the changing of a wicked person into an animal form. From Argentina, in the "Tales of Jaebe," there is an account of a cruel woman who was punished by being changed into a spider. There is also its direct opposite--that of lovers who were changed into oven birds to escape a life they did not want. Even today those birds are revered by the Argentinians!

Folktales abound with magic objects and the wonderful things they are capable of accomplishing. Many of us have held our breath while Jack climbed his beanstalk three times to steal the bags of gold. We have marveled at the hen that laid the golden eggs and the magic singing and talking harp that Jack acquired. And who hasn't wept in despair with Germany's miller's daughter as she was ordered to spin straw into gold? Secretly weren't we all glad when she outwitted Rumpelstiltskin? Denmark's remarkable "Talking Pot" is the envy of us all as we read what it did for the impoverished old Danish man and woman. Wouldn't we like to own such a battered old pot!

Time and space prohibits more examples of folktales here. However, many other delightful tales can be found categorized by country in the references mentioned at the end of this paper. The Anthology of Children's Literature reprints a wide variety of many literary offerings.[4] Public libraries have large collections of folktales of all kinds, with many themes and from very many countries of the world.

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3 Anthology of Children's Literature, Fifth Edition. Edna Johnson, Evelyn Sichels, Frances Sayers and Carolyn Horowitz. Palo Alto, California: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977.

4 Ibid.

It is suggested teachers consult their local school/county film catalogues for films of fairy tales and folktales. Because many have settings in far away lands and take place in ages past, the visual aid of a film or filmstrip adds tremendously to the students' understanding.

There exists no dearth of material from which to select stories. Teachers need only set aside a few minutes to pick up a wonderfully rich assortment of books and visual materials. The following activities lend themselves to nearly any story.

ACTIVITIES FOR FOLKTALES

1. Have students make advertising posters for folktale. Include catchy slogans, colorful artwork and bold lettering.

2. Have students make a mobile. A coat hanger makes a good base for a mobile. Characters could be drawn on papers cut out and attached to hanger with black thread.

3. Have students make a word crossing using the title of the folktale. Have the students write clues to help others fill in the blanks. Words and clues should be taken from the story.

_ _ T _ _	Who helped the woman get Thumbelina? (witch)
_ _ _ _ H _ _ _	What the bird was covered with. (feathers)
_ _ U _ _	Thumbelina lived in its house one winter. (mouse)
_ _ _ _ M _	Another name for fall. (autumn)
_ _ _ _ B _ _ _ _ _	The name of our heroine. (Thumbelina)
_ E _ _	Thumbelina's "boat." (leaf)
_ L _ _ _ _	Where Thumbelina was found. (flower)
_ I _ _	Those who cut loose the water lily leaf. (fish)
_ _ N _ _ _ _ _	What was light and warm? (sunshine)
_ _ A _ _ _ _	Who rescued Thumbelina from the mouse and the mole? (swallow)

4. Have the students write a book review as for a newspaper. Previous to writing the review, have students bring book reviews from local newspapers to study format and style of a review.

5. Have students select a character and write a "day" in the life of that character. Try to keep the activities in keeping with the time and setting of story.

6. Have students write a different ending to the folktale.

7. Have some students make a book jacket for the folktale.

8. Have students see how many sensible sentences they can write with each sentence using only one letter from the main character's name for each word in the sentence. Consulting a dictionary is helpful. For example:

   - Tiny Thumbelina trudged to the top of the table. (T)
   - Mouse and mole made the modest maiden marry mole. (M)

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